Bell Indicates He Backs King Assassin Alone Idea

Attorney General Changed Conclusion in Report, Calling It 'Extraneous' to Granting of FBI Inquiry

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SEATTLE—Atty. Gen. Griffin B. Bell said Sunday that he had changed a secret Justice Department report's conclusion that James Earl Ray had acted alone when he assassinated Martin Luther King.

Bell, contending that the conclusion was "extraneous" to the purpose of the report, indicated he had doubts about Ray's capacity to carry off the crime single-handedly.

He said the purpose of the report was to determine whether there had been cause for a lengthy FBI surveillance of the civil rights leader and to assess the quality of the FBI's assassination investigation.

The report was prepared at the request of Bell's predecessor, Edward H. Levi, in the wake of disclosures that the FBI had harassed King for several years and had wiretapped and bugged him extensively.

The report has not been released, but parts of an earlier version were leaked when Levi gave copies to several congressional chairmen.

Bell, appearing on the CBS television program Face the Nation, said the report was "couched in terms of assessing the type job the FBI did" in investigating King's slaying. In a subsequent interview, he disclosed that he had treated the report as a draft and had altered the conclusion that no conspiracy existed.

Bell said that the conclusion was "gratuitous."

"I had that part changed," he said.

The attorney general, who is attending the winter meeting of the American Bar Assn. here, said that he had asked that the report's authors discuss whether "Ray had the mental capacity" to arrange the assassination and travel through Canada and to England before he was apprehended.

Bell said that Ray, whose criminal career had been notably unsuccessful before the King slaying, had spent most of his life in penitentiaries. He said that Ray's extensive travels after the assassination "puzzled me." He directed also that Ray's IQ score be listed in the report.

Bell said he had asked two or three other persons to study the report and advise him on whether to make it public.

On the conspiracy question, Bell said, "I think if you read the report, you could lean to either side on it. You could say there is no evidence of a conspiracy, but you could still wonder if there happened to be a conspiracy."

Bell said he favored releasing the

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report but wanted to be certain that it did not "tread on anyone."

According to testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee, the FBI planted electronic bugs in hotel rooms that King occupied and then mailed a tape of the illicit eavesdropping to King and his wife, Coretta.

Bell cited the King investigation and the current investigation of alleged Korean influence peddling on Capitol Hill as examples of matters that drew much attention in [illegible] in Washington [illegible] and in the rest of the country.

In defending his decision to proceed by civil suit in the Wheeler investigation, when Justice Department officials have described as highly complex and requiring far more work, Bell said that a corrosive Watergate atmosphere had festered too long.

In reply to questions at a news conference after the program, Bell said litigation over the last 20 years had really built up the law of school desegregation, and the Supreme Court had ruled busing could be used as a last resort rather than a basic remedy. He suggested that the Administration would encourage use of local, multiracial committees to devise school desegregation plans that "may not suit everybody" but will be the best under the circumstances."

Bell said also that neither the attorney general nor the Justice Department had authority to conduct [illegible] warrantless searches. But he left open the possibility that in her words, a President could order warrantless searches [illegible] under some circumstances [illegible] national security.